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SRS shows investigation tools

Site demonstrates law enforcement technologies, including a device that can find invisible footprints

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By Brandon Haddock
Staff Writer

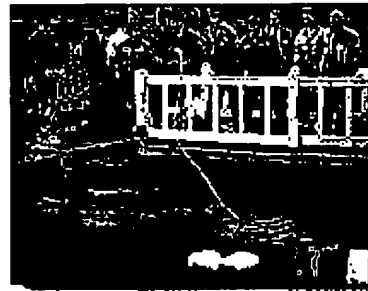
Some Savannah River Site scientists have shifted their focus from radiation to investigation.

Site officials held a demonstration Thursday of how some technological advances developed at SRS can be used in law enforcement. About 30 people, including law enforcement officers, gathered at Aiken's Hopeland Gardens to view the gadgets, which ranged from fluorescent lights for detecting fingerprints to a miniature submarine for underwater searches.

"This is to bring the technology down to the lowest level, to the state and local law enforcement agencies where it is really needed today," said Albert Boni, director of nonproliferation technologies for the site's Savannah River Technology Center.

One device uses a video camera tuned to infrared light -- light rays invisible to the human eye without special equipment. Infrared light can be used to show heat sources, so police could use the camera to locate recently dropped evidence, said Eliel Villa-Aleman, an SRS scientist who helped develop the technology.

If police reached a crime scene quickly, the camera could find evidence of human activity, such as footprints and handprints invisible to the naked eye, Dr. Villa-Aleman said.



South Carolina and Georgia officers were at Hopeland Gardens in Aiken on Thursday to view technologies developed at Savannah River Site that can be used for law enforcement, such as a miniature submarine, which is used to detect evidence underwater.

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SRS scientists also developed equipment to streamline searches for fingerprints. Traditionally, investigators needed to lug around a heavy, expensive "light box" to search for prints in a time-consuming process that left operators without any free hands, Dr. Villa-Aleman said.

Using devices developed by SRS scientists, investigators can ditch the light box for a small, helmet-mounted blue light, Dr. Villa-Aleman said. By wearing goggles that block out all but fluorescent light, investigators can spot dusted fingerprints easily, he said.

In a small pond outside, fellow scientist Jim Hoffstetter demonstrated another device -- a miniature submarine, toting a video camera, that can locate evidence underwater.

Operators steer the submarine using its camera and a remote control, Dr. Hoffstetter said. Because the submarine is small and disturbs little water, it does not kick up debris as human divers would, increasing its visibility underwater, he said.

Eventually, researchers hope to fit the submarine with a robotic arm to pick up evidence, and magnetometers to detect metal objects, Dr. Hoffstetter said.

Law enforcement officers said they were impressed with the demonstration.

"We've found that they are very open to our needs," said John Seay, agent-in-charge for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's Thomson office. "The thing about working with Savannah River Site is that if we have an idea, they know how to build it.

"I think we're building a partnership that will help law enforcement not only locally, but nationwide."

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